The U.N. at 60: A Dynamic Balance Sheet

By Edward C. Luck

Sixtieth birthdays generally trigger more reflection than celebration. For institutions, as for individuals, they attest to one's longevity, even while raising uncomfortable questions about ambitions unmet, paths not taken, and challenges ahead. For the United Nations, this is an apt moment for some candid stock-taking, as it perversely faces both a slowly unfolding scandal of historic proportions and unprecedented demand from the Member States for its wide-ranging services. What has been its balance sheet to date? And what does this pattern of achievement and failure suggest about what lies ahead?

In 1945, the United Nations's founders articulated a broad and ambitious agenda for the new world organization. According to the first Article of its Charter, it was to serve four inter-related purposes: 1) to maintain international peace and security; 2) to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace; 3) to achieve international cooperation on economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian matters, while promoting human rights; and 4) to be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in the achievement of these common ends. None of these are finite tasks. Each requires relentless pursuit over the life of the Organization.

Peace And Security

Conceived and negotiated during the most destructive war in history, the United Nations, first and foremost, was designed to succeed where its predecessor, the League of Nations, had failed most tragically: to prevent another world war. To this end, the five principal wartime allies were given special privileges and responsibilities as permanent members of the Security Council. The latter, in turn, was to have unprecedented authority and a unique arsenal of military, economic, and investigative tools for enforcing its decisions. While the blueprint was impressive, the outbreak of the Cold War within a few years of the Charter's signing ensured that little of it was realized. Member States never negotiated with the Council the arrangements for stand-by forces envisioned under Article 43; the Military Staff Committee found little to do; and no international command structure was ever developed.

As the Cold War came to divide the membership into opposing camps, the veto became a means of precluding Council action on the major crises of that era, other than when a Soviet boycott permitted a forceful response to aggression on the Korean Peninsula. Those hoping for an effective global collective security system were deeply disappointed, even disillusioned, by the turn in events. Yet, by keeping the Council from directly confronting the core security interests of the great powers, the veto allowed the United Nations to outlive the East-West tensions that otherwise surely would have destroyed it. By providing a place for quiet dialogue, as well as for pointed but peaceful verbal confrontations, the world body made a modest contribution to keeping Cold War tensions from escalating into a third world war in the twentieth century—thus meeting its core objective.

In security affairs, the United Nations proved to be remarkably resilient, responding to failure with innovation, contributing whatever and whenever it could. Though the seldom-used enforcement measures of Chapter VII were meant to be the centerpiece, frustrations there led to reliance on Chapters VI and VIII, which gave the United Nations wide latitude for behind-the-scenes efforts at pacific settlement and for delegating authority to regional arrangements for handling local conflicts. As the Council's agenda has burgeoned in recent years, there have been continuing efforts to develop just such a division of labor with regional and sub-regional groups in Africa, Latin America, and Europe.

The United Nations's hallmark contribution—peacekeeping—was not even mentioned in the Charter. To help keep small conflicts from escalating into big ones that could become embroiled in the Cold War, a range of techniques, employing non-coercive international military deployments to monitor developments or to separate combatants, were developed in the 1950s and '60s. Observer missions in the Middle East (1948) and South Asia (1949) were followed by major ground operations in the Sinai (1956), Congo (1960), and Cyprus (1964). During the waning years of the Cold War and in the early 1990s, the pace, scope, and breadth of peacekeeping operations grew rapidly. Important successes were achieved in Namibia, Mozambique, El Salvador, and, to a lesser extent, Cambodia, with the missions encompassing post-conflict nation-building as well as traditional peacekeeping. The forward movement, however, was offset by dramatic retreats in Somalia, Rwanda, and the Balkans, and disappointing results in Angola and Haiti.

By the late 1990s, the momentum had returned, with new deployments of blue helmets in East Timor, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Eritrea-Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, among others. As of January 31, 2005, there were some 65,000

United Nations peacekeepers from 103 countries deployed in 16 operations, with the tide continuing to rise toward record levels. Given the variety of missions and countries involved, there have been serious problems along the way, ranging from overly ambitious mandates to uneven performance to incidents of sexual abuse of the very victims of conflict seeking United Nations protection. On balance, however, the demand continues to far outstrip the supply of the United Nations's blue helmets, confirming that they are making an essential and unique contribution to international peace and security.

With the end of the Cold War, the Security Council also rediscovered its authority under Article 41 to impose economic, travel, arms, and diplomatic sanctions to enforce its decisions. Considerable effort has been made to sharpen and better target these tools in recent years in order to enhance their persuasiveness and lessen their humanitarian impact. Prior to the events of 9/11/01, the Council had applied sanctions against Libya, Sudan, and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan for aiding and abetting terrorism. The Council now has four sub-groups dealing with terrorism, through sanctions, reporting by Member States, and identifying gaps in their counter-terrorism strategies, legislation, and administration. While the General Assembly has yet to agree on a comprehensive convention on and definition of terrorism, earlier this year it approved the thirteenth global convention outlawing specific kinds of terrorist acts, this one on nuclear terrorism. These efforts build on the United Nations's long history of globalizing norms and safeguards against the further proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Friendly Relations And Self-determination

Today, this second of the United Nations's four core purposes may sound vague, trivial, or even quaint, but that was not the case forty or fifty years ago. When it was founded, the world body was far from the virtually universal forum it has since become. One, it began as an extension of the wartime alliance, even adopting the latter's name. To be represented at the founding conference in San Francisco, states had to have declared war on the axis powers beforehand. Several references to "enemy states" remain in the Charter. The question of how and when those countries might be reintegrated into international life remained to be seen. Two, most of Africa and much of Asia were still colonized, and debates about their future divided even the western allies. No less than three chapters of the Charter (XI, XII, and XIII) were devoted to non-self-governing territories and trusteeship, including of the colonies of the defeated powers. The Trusteeship Council—whose job is now done—was designated one of the principal organs of the new world body.

Questions of admission were also very divisive during the United Nations's early years. It took more than a quarter century to decide who should represent China. And the political and institutional implications of the expansion from 51 to 191 members are still being felt today, given the enormous disparity in the size, capacities, and interests of various Member States. Though sovereign equality is enshrined as the first principle listed in Article 2, at San Francisco it was agreed that this meant equal status before international law, rather than applying to decision-making in the Organization. As with the Cold War, the United Nations learned how to adapt to changing conditions: first encouraging progressive decolonization and then finding ways to accommodate the newly independent countries within its structures. One of the United Nations's earliest successes, in fact, was in promoting a largely peaceful process of decolonization. In the process, it transformed itself from an alliance to the first truly global organization, finding room within its ranks for countries at markedly different levels of economic and political development.

Human Rights And Economic, Social, Cultural, And Humanitarian Issues

As noted earlier, above all else, the founders strove to design an instrument that would be far more effective at insuring international peace and security than the League of Nations had proven to be. They recognized, however, that matters of war and peace could not be resolved by the force of arms or the ingenuity of diplomats alone. At the Dumbarton Oaks preparatory meetings, the U.S. delegates convinced the reluctant Soviet representatives that one of the United Nations's principal organs should be devoted to addressing economic, social, and cultural matters. As President Harry S Truman told the assembled delegates at the closing session of the San Francisco conference, the "principle of justice is the foundation stone of this Charter." The State Department's earliest draft plans for the postwar architecture called for a "general" international organization that would provide a political and legal umbrella for an ambitious network of functional and humanitarian agencies and arrangements.

Over the years, the United Nations system has grown to encompass a far wider spectrum of agencies, funds, programs, and activities than the founders could ever have imagined. Among those programs and funds closest to the central United Nations are the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), based in New York, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in Geneva, and the World Food Programme (WFP) in Rome. The specialized agencies, which are to have relationship agreements with the United Nations through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) under Article 63 of the Charter, include, among others, the International Labor Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), in Geneva, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in Rome, the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in Paris, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group, in Washington. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in Vienna, and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), in The Hague, have special relationships with the United Nations

Many of these groups have their own governing boards, funding sources, and constituencies. Each prizes some measure of autonomy. The bulk of their operational activities are carried out in the field, primarily in developing countries, far from the politics of the central inter-governmental bodies in New York. It is claimed that this is where the "real" United Nations can be found. On the one hand, the decentralized nature of the system may have helped to insulate the United Nations's functional and humanitarian work from its core political deliberations. On the other hand, this feature has complicated efforts by successive Secretaries-General to encourage system-wide managerial, programmatic, and fiscal discipline and coherence. Nevertheless, most of these programs have received relatively high marks most of the time for the professionalism of their programs.

With the influx of scores of newly independent, developing countries, the enormous challenges of eliminating poverty and promoting economic and social development surged toward the top of the U.N.'s agenda in the 1960s and '70s. For many years, deep North-South divisions led to polarized, sterile, and largely unproductive debates in the General Assembly and ECOSOC on these issues. In recent years, however, these differences have narrowed as all sides have come to appreciate that effective and sustainable development requires improvements in governance and the elimination of corruption within recipient countries along with enhancements in foreign assistance, debt relief, and trade relationships. The adoption of numerical targets and deadlines in 2000 is providing agreed benchmarks for steps toward global poverty reduction. Though the United Nations has played a key role in promoting dialogue and setting targets on these issues, its contributions on the ground have largely been limited to the efforts of UNDP, the World Bank, and those agencies dealing with related issues.

In the realm of human rights, the United Nations has achieved some of its more durable and far-reaching successes, as well as some of its more conspicuous setbacks. In many ways, the United Nations has been responsible for injecting human rights into the mainstream of international law and politics. Through the negotiation of the Universal Declaration, the Covenants, and dozens of related conventions, the United Nations has made seminal normative contributions to the global acceptance of core human rights standards. On the other hand, while the work of the High Commissioner's Office, the rapporteurs, and others in the United Nations's human rights machinery has helped to hold Member States accountable for the degree to which they respect and promote these standards, the Geneva-based, inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights has become a high-visibility embarrassment to the United Nations system. A number of abusive regimes have sought to divert the Commission's work in recent years, attesting to the depth of their concern about the impact of potential United Nations criticisms of their human rights records. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has proposed abandoning the Commission in favor of a smaller, year-round, and hopefully more dedicated Human Rights Council under the General Assembly.

Harmonizing The Actions Of Nations

The founders understood that the United Nations could be useful when Member States could not agree, as well as when they could. In the former case, it could provide a place to try to sort out their differences peacefully, while core security interests—at least for the five permanent members—would be protected by the veto. Importantly, however, the United Nations could also provide a forum for identifying both areas of common interest and ways to pursue them collectively. The process of developing consensus among the Member States, however, has never been easy. First, the Cold War split the membership along East-West lines. Then, North-South divisions dominated debates on any number of questions during the 1970s and '80s. The end of the Cold War opened up new possibilities, but, by the end of the century, asymmetries in power relationships in the world beyond the United Nations's halls and the sheer complexity of making decisions in a body with 191 diverse members slowed efforts at deep institutional reform and renewal. The United Nations has proven far more adept at adding units and tasks than at shedding them. Inter-governmental bodies could expand, sometimes to ungainly and unwieldy proportions, but could not shrink to more manageable numbers.

In some ways, core strengths of the world body have also become weaknesses. Undoubtedly, as the September 2005 summit once again confirms, the United Nations is the world's premier convener. It is the place where heads of state and government, foreign ministers, and other dignitaries want to be seen and heard. At times, they also conduct important business there, sometimes multilaterally, often bilaterally. Likewise, as a corollary, the United Nations's role as a norm-builder, even more than as an actor, is unprecedented. The 1990s, in particular, was a time of unprecedented law-making and norm-setting. But without equal capacity as an implementer, overseer, and enforcer, the United Nations's penchant for developing ever more ambitious and intrusive standards for international and, increasingly, domestic conduct could eventually prove counterproductive. Already, the new millennium is proving to be more of a time for consolidation and review of past norms than for developing new ones. Surely one of the biggest challenges of the coming years will be to reconcile the United Nations's normative strengths and proclivities with the skewed distribution of power and capacity outside its doors. On such questions, the United Nations has

proven to be both a prisoner of the international system and one of the actors that perpetually seeks to redefine it.

At the end of the day, the balance sheet resists simple calculation. The United Nations, as the world around it, is in flux. It is a dynamic and adaptable institution, which has morphed into shapes its founders never anticipated. Faced with the oil-for-food scandal and the management and accountability shortcomings it has revealed, the United Nations will be compelled, once again, to change with the times. Clearly the Member States are bent, as always, on both criticizing and using it, for they appreciate that it remains a flawed yet useful instrument.

After 60 years, moreover, the United Nations is still an experiment. There is not, and has never been, anything else quite like it. There is no ready standard of institutional perfection, therefore, to which it can be compared. No doubt it is doing far better than the League, yet far worse than many of its architects had hoped. It has become an essential element of international diplomacy, part of the furniture of contemporary international relations. As such, it is too important to be taken for granted or held to low standards. Those who care about it most will be among the first to call for its renewal and reform. In that context, the "compared to what?" question can best be addressed by looking at what the United Nations has been and can be. Is it a stronger and more useful instrument today than ten years ago? And what can be done now so that query can be answered in the affirmative when the United Nations reaches its 70th birthday down the road?

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